

PERILOUS DAYS: A KNIGHT ERRANT'S PECULIAR MISSION By WILLIAM W. RUSS

This story was commenced in The Times of Sunday, July 24.

SYNOPSIS OF PREVIOUS CHAPTERS

Max Harvey, a young American, undertakes the task of rescuing Teresa, the beautiful niece of Don Carlos, from her captors, the bandits. He is a powerful Mexican. When pursued by ruthless bandits, he escapes by jumping from a window, falls upon a man, who has been stealthily following him. He escapes, but returns to find the man attacked by bandits. He rescues him and later is arrested, while in prison is visited by the monk. He threatens Harvey and goes away. Harvey in his prison receives a note signed Teresa, imploring him to escape and rescue her. With the help of Martin, his friend, he escapes. When jumping along a road, Teresa's carriage is attacked by bandits. He rescues her, and after a strenuous journey reaches her home. When he awakens the next morning he is overcome by the news that Teresa has left the city. As he is about to go in pursuit he is arrested and thrown into prison. He is ordered executed, but before the order goes into effect he is questioned by Don Luis regarding Teresa. The monk enters the cell and attacks Harvey with a knife. Harvey knocks him down and escapes. He calls on Mr. Smith, Melrose's banker, and is told he cannot have any money. Melrose's whereabouts are unknown, but he gets it at last and meets his servant, who gives him a letter telling him Melrose is captured and asking him to come. On the way he captures five brigands and, with the aid of one of their prisoners, binds them securely. The chief is told to send a man for Banker Melrose, with the assurance that if Melrose is not brought back within an hour and safely, the remaining four brigands will be shot. At the end of the hour the bandit returned with Mr. Melrose, and the party went their way, taking two of the brigands as hostages.

CHAPTER XVII—Continued.

"I am under lasting obligations to you, Mr. Harvey," he said, after a while. "I shall see that you are well rewarded. But my niece, Teresa? I heard of her being kidnapped on the Pucisco. I was very sorry to hear of that business, and naturally concluded that you would go to La Puebla. I had not been staying in the city for a day or two, and was on the road to follow you when I was taken by the bandits. Ah, had you known them better, you would never have attempted what you have done."

"That may be, Mr. Melrose," I replied, "but it was not so difficult an undertaking as one might suppose. It was simply a matter of courage or audacity," I explained. "I was armed, and took the fellow off his guard, and they had not sense enough to recover from their surprise in time to make any resistance. Do you not remember how our army entered the City of Mexico a few years ago, after defeating the Mexicans in engagement after engagement? Success was due to audacity, the very boldness of the undertaking."

"Years ago, Cortez, with an insignificant army, a mere handful of adventurers, defeated the hordes of 'Tlascalans' not very far from where we are now. In one battle there were opposed to him nearly a hundred thousand men, and at another time one hundred and fifty thousand men. In the first battle it is said that he lost not a man, and in the second he lost only a few. He was almost insignificant, and thousands of the Tlascalans were slain."

"I have done nothing but what any bandit or robber might have accomplished, had he a mind to undertake the business. I cannot even lay my success to any special merit, but to my part, for I blundered in among them and fortune favored me. The fellows were cowards or they would have made some resistance. As I say, it was a matter of courage."

"Your courage must be of the extraordinary kind, then," said Mr. Melrose, looking me over from head to foot, as if to make sure that I was myself and not some one else.

"No, I do not think it is," I replied. "I am fearless of danger, but my familiarity with it has led me to view it with contempt. I deserve no credit for courage."

"Most certainly you do," he exclaimed. "It takes nerve and resolution. You set about doing a thing in a half-hearted way," I replied. "You will remember when the brave General Pillow was sent to storm Chapultepec, our soldiers quickly carried the outer works, climbing over fortification after fortification; and with such impetus did they press on, that the Mexicans were unable to find time to fire their guns, or to explode the mines which had been prepared."

"Before they were aware of it, our flag was set atop the castle. It is only necessary to do to something as if it were a business. The Mexicans are a slow race, and that is one of their chief faults."

"You have done nobly," replied Mr. Melrose. "You have the capacity of a general, and only lack the opportunity to distinguish yourself."

CHAPTER XVIII.

An Affair by the Way.

I do not think that I am often given to appearing egotistical, for I have always had the reputation of being somewhat reserved and unobtrusive in my speech. I am rather more of a man of action than of words. But naturally, at some times my tongue moves with more freedom than at others, and then I am disposed to run on very much as I did on the present occasion.

It was not probably, however, that Mr. Melrose meant to check me, or intended to insinuate that I was saying too much regarding myself and playing the braggart, for he had always expressed his admiration for my ability and knew that I was generally modest in speaking of myself. Neither was I offended at what he said, but upon being called to myself I very quickly lapsed into silence.

As it happened the road was good at this point, and we urged our horses forward. We did not draw rein for a mile or two, and then only because the descent became steep. Mr. Melrose was again at my side, and though quite out of breath from the exertion of keeping in the saddle, would ask me numerous questions, not only regarding his niece, but also concerning my own misadventures. I endeavored to answer his questions as modestly as possible, giving him a brief account of my misadventure, my escape and my reasons for not following out his instructions and entering into negotiations with the bandits.

Don Cortina gave a rather exaggerated account of the capture of the outlaws, in which he gave me more credit for bravery than I deserved, and himself considerable glory, which I was certainly willing to share.

"And my niece, Teresa, Melrose," exclaimed Mr. Melrose suddenly. "You

have told me scarcely anything about her."

This was, indeed, true, though it was not because I had forgotten her, for she had been constantly in my mind from the time when I first met her. Nor was I likely to forget her. But for some reason—perhaps because I was so much at a loss to account for her leaving me, and not anxious to make explanations I knew not how to make—I had said little about her.

That too, there are affairs which seem to be of such a personal nature, for instance, in this case having received a rebuff from the young lady—that one hesitates to speak about them. But now, in answer to his inquiry, I related most of what had occurred, omitting nothing that I thought would be of importance, even repeating to him our conversation. I also told him the part of the monk, Fray Ignominious, had played, especially how he had followed my footsteps and at last succeeded in securing my arrest and imprisonment.

"Is there anything about Don Luis, nor did I mention meeting him, as I did not like to speak of one who seemed to be my rival. Besides, the differences which had arisen between us seemed to be almost of a personal nature."

"And you say that you were arrested at La Puebla, and brought back?" he asked. "So this is how it came about that you were at the capital?"

"It is."

"And before you were arrested, you learned that Teresa had left the hotel?"

"I was so informed by my man Martin," I replied. "I had no reason to doubt the truth of what he said."

"You think this man Martin you speak of is trustworthy?"

"Certainly I do," I answered. "I have implicit confidence in him."

"It is not likely that that he had anything to do with your being arrested, or that he induced Teresa to go away?"

"I do not think so," I replied. "I am convinced that he knew nothing of my arrest until after it had been made."

"Then you believe it was the monk, Fray Ignominious, who induced her to go away?"

"I do, and that he knew where she went," I said. "He followed us to La Puebla, and I learned afterward from his own lips that he was the person who informed on me and had me arrested."

"She left no word?"

"None that I know of. I should have thought, though she would not have gone without leaving a word for me."

"There are many religious houses in the city, and it is possible that she may have gone to one of these," he suggested. "But for that matter, her experience in the past and the objections she has always made to entering a convent are against such a proposition."

"Do not know the circumstances which led to her leaving the convent, and as for her nunneries and convents, I am prejudiced against them."

"I do not say that she did not act wisely," I replied. "As things turned out—I being arrested—it was perhaps the best that she did not remain at the hotel."

"Yes, yes, because we cannot tell what would have occurred. She may be with friends and well cared for. The monk, Fray Ignominious, he is dead, you say?"

"I think there can be no question but what he is dead," I answered. "It is the hand of God! And God be praised!" exclaimed Mr. Melrose.

I could have said amen to this. I, in particular, had reason to be thankful for Fray Ignominious' death. He may be with friends and well cared for. The monk, Fray Ignominious, he is dead, you say?"

"But there are others who will oppose us," he said. "Did it ever happen that you met one Don Luis Robolo? I have heard his name mentioned in connection with that of my niece."

I was about to say that I had met him, when he continued:

"It is not strange to say that I should have admirers, but he is a—"

"I think he was about to say 'Spaniard,' but, looking up, he saw Don Cortina. He had got some distance ahead of us while we were talking, had drawn rein, and was waiting for us somewhat impatiently."

"If we proceed in this leisurely fashion," he said, "we may expect to be overtaken. Or, do you want to give those rascals another chance at us?" he asked, turning to me.

"The rascals have had their chance," I replied. "And as for being in a hurry, we will reach La Puebla in good time."

"We will be lucky if we reach there at all," he retorted. "The more I think of it, the more I am satisfied that we made great mistakes in leaving the city to follow us. The cutthroats—they are a bad lot. Did you mark the cunning in their chief's eye? I would have—"

He stopped suddenly. Something across the valley had attracted his attention. I looked up just in time to see a horseman disappear over the ridge, and very soon two others followed him. They were Mexicans, and were armed; but further than that I could not tell. Their appearance caused Don Cortina some uneasiness.

"Bandits!" he muttered. "What did I tell you? We are not yet out of the woods."

I endeavored to laugh at the idea that the men were bandits, for I saw that what he said had caused Mr. Melrose much alarm; and, in truth, I did not believe that we would be attacked. We were well armed, and could make a good fight. It was probable that the men we saw were herders, and came from the hacienda; or they might be travelers like ourselves.

But we pushed ahead a little faster than we had been doing. As we drew up our horses again, I noticed that Mr. Melrose was looking pale, and drew seemingly keeping his seat in the saddle with difficulty.

"This will not do for you to travel without breakfast," I said, turning to him. "You are ill already."

"I have not been well," he replied, "but I do not concern myself on my account. We will keep on. I am anxious to reach La Puebla as soon as possible."

"It may be that Senor Harvey has been in the habit of taking his breakfast with his dinner," suggested Don Cortina, with a faint smile. "I can assure myself that for some time I have felt the need of a cup of coffee."

"And we will have it," I replied, "for if I am not mistaken there is a house ahead of us on the road, and we will see what we can get to eat. But I will say that I have of late been accustomed to eat when circumstances make it convenient for me to do so."

"But we will not adopt your custom," said the Spaniard, "unless circumstances necessitate. It is an American custom I don't like. As to the house you speak

of, it is kept by a greaser, and it is well we are hungry if we are to eat breakfast there, for I can promise you that they do not set a table d'hôte, nor are meals served 'en cours.'"

"We will take what we can get, and be thankful for it," said Mr. Melrose. "A cup of coffee will be better than nothing. It will warm us up."

Under the excitement caused by the mental strain I had been subject to, though the rapid changing of events, I had not noticed the cold, nor had I thought before of eating. The sun was now well up, the morning advanced, and it was no longer chilly.

We had been descending from the high elevation of the mountains all the time, and it is wonderful what a change elevation will effect in temperature. But my companions were older than I; their blood was not so warm, nor were they used to roughing it as I had been doing for the last two years. Then, too, I lived several months in the high altitudes of the City of Mexico had served to acclimate me.

A dog snarled at us as we rode up to the house; a shiffling, ill clad, barefooted fellow came to the door, stared at us vacantly, and then, as if he were an Indian boy, who stretched himself and got up lazily from a pile of straw in a shed at one end of the house. We dismounted, giving our horses to the person he came to take them, and went into the house.

The house was but a hovel, with the ground for a floor. One or two small windows admitted a little light. The room smelt abominably of orders which were beyond my power of analyzing, except to say that they were most vile.

It would seem that the fire—what little it was—was needed for cooking, as there was nowhere on the floor, as was most convenient, and the smoke allowed to escape as best it might through door or windows. At one end of the room there was a bundle of magueiro fibers, which were used as a bed. There was also a table, and near the walls were benches or stools. These things, with a few cooking utensils, constituted about all the furniture of the room.

A woman, as frowzy as the man, was seated on the ground, engaged in preparing tortillas, a task, as it seemed to me, which was the universal occupation of Mexican women. She looked up as we entered, but did not rise.

The dog still barked at our heels, and the man gave him a kick which sent him howling out of the door, and then offered us seats. Mr. Melrose sank into the nearest one, and I waited for the Spaniard. He had turned to the man.

"We want some coffee," he explained, "as good as you can make, and also something to eat."

"Yes, señor," he replied, courteously enough, "we will give you the best we have."

The best they had, with the lower classes of Mexicans, was bad enough. I knew, it mattered not about the war, for it affected them very little. They never had anything. The property and wealth of the nation belonged to the church, and the few wealthy families.

Yet poverty to those who knew nothing better was a higher ambition than merely to exist, was not intolerable. It was their inheritance, and generations of life under the same conditions had inured them to it. And this, too, in a land of wonderful resources, where it would seem that everyone might have plenty and abundance.

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that she was holding something concealed beneath her robe. The Spaniard must have noticed it, too, for, quick as a flash, he sprang forward and wrenched the knife from her hand, hurling her from him, but before he could turn to defend himself, the man was upon him, furious with rage.

"Villain!" I exclaimed, making a bound for the Mexican, and clutching at his throat. He struggled to get away from me, but I bore him down to the ground. Fortunately it was for me that we fell, for, as we went down together, a bullet whizzed over my head, and there were shouts and cries from outside the house.

I fell upon the Mexican, and he was partially stunned by the fall. As I recovered myself, the room seemed to grow dark. I was conscious that Mr. Melrose had fallen back against the wall, and I remember afterward having seen the Spaniards crouched behind the table.

He was leaning over it, his revolver drawn—he was holding it with both hands—and then he fired. Something struck me on the head, and half blinded and mad with pain, I drew my revolver and began firing at the doorway.

I did not know how long I was there, but I was able to walk without assistance. I had received a wound in my side which hurt me some. The scalp wound, though ugly, and having bled profusely, was not serious.

It had probably been inflicted with a carbine barrel; but, had the blow been a little more direct, it might have fractured my skull. I was somewhat annoyed because I had seemed to make so much of my hurts.

Mr. Melrose had received several small injuries, but nothing that gave him much trouble. Being weak, and convalescent from his previous sickness, the nervous strain had been great.

I apprehended more danger from this than anything else. I had felt alarmed for him during the morning, and now I was afraid he would not be able to go on. But he kept up with a wonderful show of endurance.

Don Cortina soon joined us, his face stern and rigid as if he had performed a valiant service—a little disagreeable, but a matter of necessity. There was, however, a look of satisfaction in his eyes, and I thought his sternness was for effect.

"I see you are able to be up," he said, speaking to me. "You should have been at the execution. The work was quickly and neatly done."

I thanked him as best I could. The bandits taken prisoners were hung," I replied. "They were, and by my order," he answered with dignity; though why it was by his order I am not able to explain.

"Well, if you are satisfied, I have nothing to say," I replied.

You are a noble fellow, though inclined to be a little too lenient in dealing with outlaws," he said, offering me his hand. "I blamed you for letting those fellows go when you had them in your power. It was the only honorable thing you could do, but I was right; they should have been shot. Some day I hope to be able to show you my appreciation of your integrity."

I thanked him as best I could. I was glad enough for his friendship, for in this strange country I had none too many friends, and certainly enemies enough without making more.

We rested for a couple of hours, and then resumed our journey. Mr. Melrose was not in a condition to travel, but he kept up wonderfully well. I had not felt myself as if I was equal to the exertion required for a long ride.

As we went by the door of the house where we had the fight, I saw the bodies of the dead bandits lying near where they had fallen. They had been stripped of their weapons, and everything else of value.

They presented a ghastly appearance, and did not like to look at them, but turned away, for a sickness seemed to come over me. I had seen men killed before, but never before or since have I experienced the queer sensation of faintness which then came over me.

We kept with the soldiers, and stayed that night in Tlaxcala. We could not very well have gone further. In fact, did not arrive at Puebla until long after sundown.

Don Cortina proved to be a most congenial traveling companion. He showed Mr. Melrose much kindness, even taking upon himself to procure him comfortable quarters and a good bed. He also arranged for him a night's stay in a bunk in a large room occupied by the captain and some of the other officers. They smoked cigarettes and played cards, but I was too tired to join with them; yet I did not go to sleep.

"If this expedition is not successful, Junrez will be president of Mexico," I heard the captain say, as he was dealing out the cards.

It sounded almost like treason, coming, as it did, from an officer of the conservative forces; but the other officers appeared to accept it as a plain statement of facts. I thought them in part regarding the success of their party.

I did not then understand the cool way Mexican soldiers had of weighing the probability of success, and calculating the personal advantages to be gained by one or another of the candidates. I saw whole companies, when they found they were on the losing side, go over to the opposition.

The conversation was principally upon the war and camp gossip. They discussed the merits of different officers, and told of their peculiarities. They discussed these things with a freedom and confidence in each other; and especially so, since they were in a country where men were often shot for their utterances or opinions.

How will he wish Don Carlos de Ulloa asked one of the officers—a lieutenant.

"He has thrown everything with the Conservatives. Fool! If they lose, everything is up with him."

"I do not know," replied the lieutenant, "those who are the truest and best of men are always the most reserved. If we win, there is a chance that he may some day be president. There is a good deal in the game, and he is just the man to play for high stakes."

The captain sat back in his chair and watched the smoke of his cigarette curl above his head. Evidently he was fully aware that war was a big game and the result very uncertain.

"I heard that Don Carlos was losing favor," remarked the lieutenant.

"It has been hinted at," replied the captain, "but there is no truth in it. It was reported, too, that his daughter was to marry Don Luis."

"She is his stepdaughter, is she not?" asked the second lieutenant.

The captain glanced toward me, but my eyes were shaded, and all appeared

upon the bandits in the rear, they had captured two of their number, the other four having been killed.

"And Don Cortina—he is safe?" I asked, not seeing him anywhere.

"Safe," cried the captain, with a wink at his men. "Not a scratch to boast of. Blackened a little with powder, his clothes somewhat dusty, but he is as sound as ever he was. Ah, but he has had his sport, for he has just assisted in the hanging of the two fellows we captured."

"Hanging them?" I asked in surprise.

"Yes, what else would we have done with them? They were not worth the powder and lead to shoot them. Besides, the example—it is a warning for those of their class."

"Unfortunate wretches!" I groaned, half in sympathy with them, and half in horror at the summary way of dealing with prisoners.

The men only laughed. I shut my eyes and shuddered. I could imagine how ferocious the Don could be, had he but the opportunity for showing his spleen. But I felt too miserable myself to care very much.

After resting a while I felt better, and found that I was able to walk without assistance. I had received a wound in my side which hurt me some. The scalp wound, though ugly, and having bled profusely, was not serious.

It had probably been inflicted with a carbine barrel; but, had the blow been a little more direct, it might have fractured my skull. I was somewhat annoyed because I had seemed to make so much of my hurts.

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